

# Charlemagne and the Saxons

## Introduction and Background Information

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The policies of peaceful conversion and accommodation did not prevail everywhere, as Charlemagne's dealings with the Saxons reveals. During the late 8<sup>th</sup> and early 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, Charlemagne (reigned 768-814) was the powerful king of the Franks. He turned his Frankish kingdom into a Christian empire that briefly incorporated much of continental Europe, and he was crowned as a renewed Roman emperor by The Pope. In the course of almost constant wars of expansion, Charlemagne struggled for over 30 years to subdue the Saxons, a "pagan" Germanic people who inhabited a region on the northeastern frontier of Charlemagne's growing empire. The document known as the *Capitulary on Saxony* outlines a series of laws, regulations, and punishments regarding religious practice of the Saxons. This document reveals both the coercive policies of Charlemagne and the vigorous resistance of the Saxons to their forcible incorporation into his Christian domain.

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### **Capitulary for Saxony 775-790**

Read through each of the following series of regulations.

1. It was pleasing to all that the churches of Christ, which are now being built in Saxony and consecrated to God, should not have less, but greater and more illustrious honor, than the fanes of the idols had had.
2. If any one shall have fled to a church for refuge, let no one presume to expel him from the church by violence, but he shall be left in peace until he shall be brought to the judicial assemblage; and on account of the honor due to God and the saints, and the reverence due to the church itself, let his life and all his members be granted to him. Moreover, let him plead his cause as best he can and he shall be judged; and so let him be led to the presence of the lord king, and the latter shall send him where it shall have seemed fitting to his clemency.
3. If any one shall have entered a church by violence and shall have carried off anything in it by force or theft, or shall have burned the church itself, let him be punished by death.
4. If any one, out of contempt for Christianity, shall have despised the holy Lenten fast and shall have eaten flesh, let him be punished by death. But, nevertheless, let it be taken into consideration by a priest, lest perchance any one from necessity has been led to eat flesh.
5. If any one shall have killed a bishop or priest or deacon, let him likewise be punished capitally.
6. If any one deceived by the devil shall have believed, after the manner of the pagans, that any man or woman is a witch and eats men, and on this account shall have burned the person, or shall have given the person's flesh to others to eat, or shall have eaten it himself, let him be punished by a capital sentence.
7. If any one, in accordance with pagan rites, shall have caused the body of a dead man to be burned and shall have reduced his bones to ashes, let him be punished capitally.
8. If any one of the race of the Saxons hereafter concealed among them shall have wished to hide himself unbaptized, and shall have scorned to come to baptism and shall have wished to remain a pagan, let him be punished by death.
9. If any one shall have sacrificed a man to the devil, and after the manner of the pagans shall have presented him as a victim to the demons, let him be punished by death.
10. If any one shall have formed a conspiracy with the pagans against the Christians, or shall have wished to join with them in opposition to the Christians, let him be punished by death; and whoever shall have consented to this same fraudulently against the king and the Christian people, let him be punished by death.
11. If any one shall have shown himself unfaithful to the lord king, let him be punished with a capital sentence.
12. If any one shall have ravished the daughter of his lord, let him be punished by death.

13. If any one shall have killed his lord or lady, let him be punished in a like manner.
14. If, indeed, for these mortal crimes secretly committed any one shall have fled of his own accord to a priest, and after confession shall have wished to do penance, let him be freed by the testimony of the priest from death.
15. Concerning the lesser chapter all have consented. To each church let the parishioners present a house and two mansi of land, and for each one hundred and twenty men, noble and free, and likewise liti [freedmen], let them give to the same church a man-servant and a maid-servant.
16. And this has been pleasing, Christ being propitious, that when so ever any receipts shall have come into the treasury, either for a breach of the peace or for any penalty of any kind, and in all income pertaining to the king, a tithe shall be rendered to the churches and priests.
17. Likewise, in accordance with the mandate of God, we command that all shall give a tithe of their property and labor to the churches and priests; let the nobles as well as the freemen, and likewise the liti, according to that which God shall have given to each Christian, return a part to God.
18. That on the Lord's day no meetings and public judicial assemblages shall be held, unless perchance in a case of great necessity or when war compels it, but all shall go to the church to hear the word of God, and shall be free for prayers or good works. Likewise, also, on the special festivals they shall devote themselves to God and to the services of the church, and shall refrain from secular assemblies.
19. Likewise, it has been pleasing to insert in these decrees that all infants shall be baptized within a year; and we have decreed this, that if any one shall have despised to bring his infant to baptism within the course of a year, without the advice or permission of the priest, if he is a noble he shall pay 120 solidi to the treasury, if a freeman 60, if a litus 30.
20. If any shall have made a prohibited or illegal marriage, if a noble 60 solidi, if a freeman 30, if a litus 15.
21. If any one shall have made a vow at springs or trees or groves, or shall have made any offerings after the manner of the heathen and shall have partaken of a repast in honor of the demons, if he shall be a noble 60 solidi, if a freeman 30, if a litus

**Solidi:** Gold Coins

**Litus:** Neither a slave nor a free person

**Fanes:** Temples

1. What does this document reveal about the kind of resistance that the Saxons mounted against their enforced conversion?
2. What does the document suggest about Charlemagne's views of his duties as a ruler?
3. In what ways did Charlemagne seek to counteract the pagan resistance? What evidence supports your answer?
4. Choose any three policies found in the document that you feel are the most extreme. Summarize them in your own words, and then explain why you feel the chosen three are the harshest policies.

Policy Number	Summarize in your own words	Explanation as to why it is representative of one of the harshest policies in your opinion.